C5150-b

National
Home Center News

Vol. 18. No. 4 $5 a copy The Journal of News & Trends for Home Improvement Retailers, Co-ops & Wholesalers. Published by Lebhar-Friedman Inc. Feb. 17, 1992

Photo courtesy of Las Vegas Review-Journal

(Left to right) Joe Hardy, president of 84 Lumber, Timothy Eller, Centex Homes, and former president Jimmy Carter discuss Habitat for Humanity's Homes Across America affordable housing program.

84 Lumber active in housing program

Vendors also contribute to project

by John Sinisi

LAS VEGAS — Joe Hardy, president and founder of 84 Lumber, joined former president Jimmy Carter and Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) in dedicating the first of Habitat for Humanity's Homes Across America affordable houses.

Hardy's 365-unit chain donated roughly $6,000 worth of the lumber and windows for the 1,200-square-foot building, and encouraged 18 of the chain's vendors to make sizable donations of paint, molding, tools, hardware and other products.

• More community service notes, pg. 2
• News from the NAHB show, pg. 4

The house, which National Association of Home Builders Institute carpenters framed and sealed in just 48 hours, was on display outside the Las Vegas Convention Center. A three-bedroom, one-story building, it will go by trailer to a nearby development, where it will sell for $25,000 to $30,000. The buyer must put in at least 350 hours of labor on the remainder of the project.

For Hardy, the project was a chance to get the rest of the building materials community involved in providing more-affordable housing for people whose dream of owning a home is just barely beyond their means.

"I wanted to create some awareness that there are good people in this country who earn a decent wage but still can't afford their first home," he said. He added that he hopes his vendors will respond by donating more materials for Houses Across America in their local markets.

It was also an opportunity for Hardy to announce what he described as 84's mission for 1992: to entrench the chain in the affordable housing market niche.

BE kicks off expansion plan

Las Vegas Ole's units first to get new look

by Robyn Taylor

LAS VEGAS — Builders Emporium (BE) has begun remodeling all four of its Ole's units here to match the reformatted look of its fifth store, which opened last June on Rancho Drive in the north part of this city.

The Vegas Ole's, which resembles five of the most recently opened and eight reformatted BE units in California, should be completed by mid-March. At that time, BE will begin a heavy advertising campaign promoting the new look in this market.

With only five stores here, BE will market its expanded merchandise assortment and customer service to the entire region, said Darrell Heun, vice president-marketing/store planning.

The remodels here follow on the heels of the reformatted stores in California. These units—in Fountain Valley, Mission Viejo, El Toro,

(Continued on page 29)

NHCN photo

***New for Ole's**—and possibly a preview of what's to come at Builders Emporium—is a huge paint store-within-a-store at the rear of the center drive aisle. The Vegas remodels follow the lead of the reformatted California stores.*

Environmental laws will alter batteries, tools

by Elizabeth Brent

NATIONAL REPORT — Last month New Jersey Governor Jim Florio signed an environmental law imposing some of the toughest standards yet on the manufacture and disposal of dry-cell batteries.

The challenge is to redesign cordless tools without excessive price increases.

The law requires manufacturers to virtually eliminate mercury from dry-cell batteries by the end of 1995. It also requires the redesign of cordless power tools and appliances by July 1993 to allow for the removal of the rechargeable batteries.

New Jersey is just one of 10 states now imposing environmental laws that will have far-reaching effects on both retailers and manufacturers.

Minnesota, for example, requires manufacturers to have their pilot programs for the collection of used nickel-cadmium batteries in place by April 15.

New Jersey requires that as of January 1993 retailers will

(Continued on page 29)

Cotter gets Macleod-Stedman

by Gary S. Ruderman

WINNIPEG, Man. — On Thursday, a receptionist answered the phone: "MSI, Inc."

On Friday, the salutation was "Cotter Canada."

With the acquisition of more than 280 Macleod-Stedman dealers in Canada, Cotter & Co. opens the door to as much as $300 million per year in new business this decade, and can be credited with saving a well-known retailing name from extinction.

(Cont'd on page 30)

SECOND CLASS

Pergament turns switch off on Rooms 'N Lights p. 3
Ganahl's specialty woods division thrives p. 11
Industry execs reject trade protectionism p. 21

Retailers heed builders' optimism at NAHB show

Association predicts total housing starts will inch up to almost 1.2 million units this year

by John Sinisi

LAS VEGAS — Harry Seigle looked around the main exhibit hall of the National Association of Home Builders' Annual Show and marveled at the level of optimism that he was receiving from builders there.

"The key words here are 'refreshing and invigorating,'" pronounced Seigle, whose Elgin, Ill.-based home center chain, Seigle's Home & Building Centers, paid the way for 120 contractor-customers to come out to the show as part of a promotion. As a result, Seigle's stores have received commitments for more business in the first quarter of this year from most of those delegates.

Builders attending the convention conveyed similar messages to retailers in attendance, including representatives from Meeks Building Centers, Lowe's Cos., Home Depot, Ace Hardware and Payless Cashways.

Of the many retail delegations to attend the show, only the Kansas City, Mo.-based Payless flew its flag, holding down a booth at the far corner of the main hall.

Susan Stanton, senior vp-merchandising for the 195-unit chain, said the benefits that her company receives from its high profile at the NAHB affair go beyond attracting new accounts.

"Very basically, it lets the building community know that we are making a total commitment to them, through our grass roots and national participation in NAHB," she explained.

This year's NAHB show *(Continued on page 29)*

The floor at the recent National Association of Home Builders show was busy with both builders and retailers. NHCN photo

Housing Starts: 1988 - 1992

Year	Single Family	Multi-Family	Total
1988	1,081,000	407,000	1,488,000
1989	1,003,000	373,000	1,376,000
1990	895,000	298,000	1,193,000
1991	842,000	173,000	1,015,000
1992*	985,000	200,000	1,185,000

*National Association of Home Builders forecast

Source: Bureau of the Census — *NHCN* chart

Sutherland brother 'R.Q.', co-owner of lumber chain, dies

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Robert Quentin Sutherland, one of four brothers who owned the Sutherland Lumber Co., died at his home on Jan. 21 at the age of 72. The cause of death was not disclosed.

According to the *Kansas City Star*, Sutherland was more interested in horses than in retailing for most of his life.

He was the former owner of a quarter horse breeding ranch, a past chairman of the American Royal Horse Show, a Kansas City event, and a former president of the American Quarter Horse Association. He wrote *The Book of Colt Firearms* and *The Quarter Horse as I See Him.*

In an *NHCN* profile of the family business in 1990 it was reported that R.Q., as he was known, sold his four stores in Wichita, Kan., and Amarillo, Texas, in the 1970s. R.Q. and his three brothers and one sister took over the Sutherland Lumber Co. in 1941 following the death of their father, Robert, who founded Sutherland in 1918 in Kansas City.

Sutherland is survived by two sons, Robert Kent Sutherland of Newport Beach, Calif., and Bradford Sutherland of Hattiesburg, Miss.; three daughters; his brothers, Herman, Dwight and John Sutherland; and his sister, Donna Rachel Pearson.

Pay 'N Pak hones in on bank debt

Sells 2 Hawaiian properties to K mart for $30.7 million

KENT, Wash. — Pay 'N Pak's financial picture is looking more hopeful everyday.

Last month, the company, which filed for protection under Chapter 11 last September, closed the sale on its two Hawaiian properties and reached an agreement with its bank group to ease certain sales and earnings covenants.

The Northwest chain sold its 81,364-square-foot Honolulu store, which sits on 5.7 acres, and a six-acre undeveloped piece of land on Maui to K mart Corp. for $30.7 million. Proceeds will go toward reducing Pay 'N Pak's bank debt.

The chain will continue to operate the Honolulu store for about another month. After that, the company will relocate most of its product to its 16 stores throughout the Puget Sound area, said president John Markley in a release. Seasonal merchandise will be liquidated through a going-out-of-business sale starting next week, according to a spokesman. All furniture and fixtures will be sold at an auction.

"It is our understanding that K mart will expand the Honolulu store in order to operate 90,000-square-foot stores on both sites," Markley said in the release.

He said K mart officials intend to interview the more than 80 Pay 'N Pak employees for potential positions at the new discount stores.

This will be K mart's first entry into the Hawaii market and many new jobs will be created, Markley said.

In other promising news for the chain, Pay 'N Pak's bank group agreed to amend certain covenants in its $100 million credit facility.

Without the pressures of meeting higher monthly sales and earnings levels originally expected, Pay 'N Pak can now use the additional credit to buy more product and expedite remodeling plans, said Markley.

"Our lenders are supportive of the chain's direction; we believe that their willingness to amend the covenants demonstrates their continuing confidence in our ability to reorganize."

Corrections

An article about a marketing agreement between California Hardware and Triad Systems Corp. did not fully represent the price of the computers Triad offers.

Dealers can purchase an accounting package-only system for under $10,000. But, according to Stephen McLaughlin, Triad's director of national accounts, the price range on more elaborate systems would increase, "depending on the needs of the dealer."

A story published Jan. 20 about Chase-Pitkin opening in Buffalo, N.Y., incorrectly stated that Hechinger operated a store in that market. Hechinger has units in Rochester and Syracuse, but not Buffalo.

Hines buys lumberyard from Erb

Mokena, Ill., yard's shoppers, products comparable to Hines'

ITASCA, Ill. — Edward Hines Lumber Co. has recently acquired a 9½-acre lumberyard from Michigan-based Erb Lumber.

No terms of the January sale of the yard, located in Mokena, Ill., were disclosed.

"We've long sought a lumberyard location in this southwest suburban [Chicago] location," said Edward Hines, president, in a prepared statement. "The Mokena lumberyard's customer base and product mix mirrors that of our company."

The property has a 17,000-square-foot showroom and 40,000 square feet of covered lumber storage. The Jan. 3 sale signals an exit from the Illinois market for Erb, which operates 50 retail yards in the Midwest. Privately held Hines, which celebrates its 100th anniversary in March, operates 25 yards in the Chicago area and had reported sales of $100 million in 1990.

Free trade makes good sense

Protectionism would offer little cure for the country's ills

by Ken Schept

Les Wexner, the founder and chairman of the retailer The Limited, is leading a new effort to curb any Congressional inclination to pass protectionist trade legislation.

His group, called the Retail Industry Trade Action Coalition, opposes any protection of U.S. textile manufacturers that would restrict imports.

The Coalition asserts that this would result in higher prices and less choice for American consumers.

While it's an intelligent argument, getting that message across will be tough in these fearful, job-threatening times, when looking for the union label would seem like the patriotic thing to do.

But this issue isn't about patriotism, although Wexner makes a good point. He claims that the retail industry employs 20 million people, which makes it a critical component of the U.S. economy.

More important, however, is the basic point of the Coalition's message.

The strength of American industry and the jobs it provides will not be enhanced by protectionism.

Neither will incentives to buy American products save or create many jobs, although the sentiment is understandable.

Being out of work is a frightening circumstance, which too many Americans are facing.

Trade protection will not solve their problem, which needs the federal government's swift attention.

As the world moves toward a single-market economy, decisions about product sourcing and production will be made strictly on a rational, not national, basis.

Artificial barriers, such as Japan's rice supports, will erode over time.

Meanwhile, American companies need to be lean, innovative and responsive to customers and vigorous in the pursuit of quality.

Commenting derisively about the Japanese, or any other group of people, is absolutely unacceptable and symptomatic of the depth of this country's problems, which will not be solved by turning inward.

Rather, we must be as open as possible in understanding and relating with good will toward the rest of the world.

Those who argue otherwise need to be reminded that it's not regulations, but quality, integrity and value which are the highest barriers to entry.

Homeowning universe in limbo

Stores' message needs to reach a shrinking youth market

by John Caulfield

Is the aging of America stifling the home buying ethic?

Most people would probably see as specious the connection between a population growing older and the propensity to buy a home. But the February issue of *American Demographics* presents a fascinating blizzard of statistics tracking this country's shrinking youth market that lend themselves to, at least, a discussion of this question.

A few highlights of that study should tweak the interests—and the future marketing plans—of home improvement retailers and suppliers:

- In 1980, 63.8 percent of the U.S. population was under 18. In 1990 it was 63.6 percent. The U.S. population grew by 10 percent during that period, but all the growth occurred in the adult population;
- The number of 18- to 24-year-olds fell by 11 percent in the past decade and, more significantly, the 14- to 17-year-old segment plummeted by 18 percent;
- However, teenagers still comprise a sizable target market. They spent $55 billion of their own money last year, and $27 billion of their families' dough;
- Fifty-three percent of the 18- to 24-year-olds who have never married still lived at home with their parents in 1990, compared to 43 percent in 1960.

Retailers and suppliers of home improvement merchandise may be losing their influence with young Americans whose numbers are dwindling, and a substantial percentage who are home with mom and dad. These young consumers aren't giving any thought to spending money in a home center. And, even taking the affordability question into account, how hot is the desire to eventually own a home burning among these young men and women?

This industry—through its associations, its larger dealers and its giant suppliers—needs to make a greater impression on the powers that be that an erosion in this homeowning universe, or in the motivation to own a home, will cause serious damage to the economy as a whole.

Stores and suppliers must also take a more active role in getting their message to this population segment through the media they are most likely to favor.

Interestingly, the *American Demographics* section quotes a Simmons Market Research Bureau study which states that nearly 7 out of every 10 teenagers read one daily newspaper a week.

Think about what you're doing with your ROP advertising—you may be persuading a future customer.

National Home Center News®
The Journal of News & Trends for Home Improvement Retailers, Co-ops & Wholesalers

published by
LEBHAR-FRIEDMAN INC.
425 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022
212-756-5000/Fax: 212-838-9487

EDITORIAL OFFICES

New York 425 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022, 212-756-5151/Fax: 212-756-5295

Publisher—WYATT KASH (756-5150)

Editor—KENNETH SCHEPT (-5149)

Executive Editor—John Caulfield (-5146)
Senior Editor—Elizabeth Brent (-5145)
Associate Editor—John Sinisi (-5144)
Senior Desk Editor—Laura Realmuto (-5140)
Desk Editor—Michael M. Ross (-5141)
Editorial Assistant—Diane L. Fristachi (-5142)
Art Director—Robert Brokman (-5091)
Graphic Designer—Angela Fontana (-5094)

Chicago 444 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611, 312-644-8688 Fax: 312-644-3256

Senior Editor—Gary S. Ruderman

Los Angeles 606 N. Larchmont Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90004, 213-464-8321 Fax: 213-465-4287

Associate Editor—Robyn Taylor

Editorial Inquiries
Questions and comments regarding editorial material published in National Home Center News should be directed to the Editor, Ken Schept.

VP, Group Publisher—FRED FILER

ADVERTISING SALES/PRODUCTION

New York/Eastern U.S.
Nat'l Sales Manager—
CHRISTOPHER C. HARRISON (756-5139)
Eastern Area Mgr.—Tuck Sifers (-5138)
Customer Service—Maria I. Nossa, (-5148)
Monique Shiver (-5147)
Classified Ad Mgr.—Carole Harnoff (-5153)
Production Manager—Gwendolyn Terrell (-5059)
Classified Prod. Mgr.—Larry Brush (-5060)
Contract Manager—Linda Claussen (-5022)
Business Manager—Joel Safir (-5021)
Dir. of Manufacturing—Stan Kaufman (-5051)

Chicago/Midwest 444 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611, 312-644-8688
Fax: 312-644-3256
Senior Area Manager—Sid Hybert
Area Manager—Mark Cullum
Office Manager—Beverly Wendtland

San Francisco/Western U.S./Int'l 220 Montgomery St., Suite 930, San Francisco, CA 94104, 415-362-2575
Fax: 415-362-0319
Regional Manager—
Richard J. Harrigan Jr.
Administrative Assistant—
Audrey Hampshire

Tokyo Diamond-Friedman Ltd., Chain Store Age News, 1-4-2 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan 504-6750

Milan HOGA ITALIA s.r.l.
Piazza San Camillo De Lellis 1
20124 Milan, Italy
Tel: 02-66988424; Fax: 02-66984771

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

Tampa, FL P.O. Box 31185, Tampa, FL 33631-3185
813-664-6707
Circulation Director—Cindy Stump (664-6747)

LEBHAR-FRIEDMAN, INC.

Founder (1900-1981) Arnold D. Friedman

President—J. Roger Friedman
VP/Administration—Harry A. Estes
VP/Group Publisher—Fred J. Filer
VP/Group Publisher—Jay Forbes
VP/Publisher—John Rapuzzi
VP/Finance—James Granato
VP/Circulation—Martha Pettley
VP/Human Resources—John Murro
Director/Corporate Development—John O'Brien

Publisher of National Home Center News, Discount Store News, Nation's Restaurant News, Drug Store News, Accounting Today, Chain Store Age Executive (with Shopping Center Age), *APPAREL merchandising*, Food Merchandising, Home Market Trends, National Industry Reports, Supermarket HQ Quarterly. Affiliates: Business Guides Inc. (Directories); Lebhar-Friedman Books; Inside Retailing (Newsletter); Chain Store Age News, Japan; Largo Music Inc.

Permissions
Materials in this publication may not be reproduced in any form without written permission. Requests for permission should be directed to Wyatt Kash, publisher, Lebhar-Friedman Inc., 425 Park Ave., New York, NY 10022.

ABP BPA ahma NHCNA

Battery producers adapt to stringent legislation

(Continued from page 1)
have to accept used nickel-cadmium or sealed-lead rechargeable batteries from consumers during business hours.

Dealers will also have to display posters at the point of sale informing consumers that used rechargeable batteries have to be recycled, and this can be done through the store.

Retailers would need to turn in the waste batteries on a regular basis to prevent holding more than 100 kilograms, at which point they would need to comply with EPA regulations governing hazardous waste.

Vendors respond

The challenge is to redesign consumer products without excessive price increases.

Skil and Black & Decker are just two cordless power tool suppliers tackling this problem. Skil's new FLEXI-Pak system, slated to debut at the Hardware Show in August, offers one solution. The 3.6-volt FLEXI-Pak unit contains three nickel-cadmium rechargeable batteries and is removable. It also fits seven different tools, including Skil's new Twist Xtra.

But the product will cost about 5 to 10 percent more than earlier models, according to director of marketing Chuck Heinlen.

Laws that require battery collection are forcing cordless power tool manufacturers to think in terms of reverse distribution. Black & Decker will print toll-free numbers on its packages in Minnesota. These numbers will lead the caller to an operator for the Portable Rechargeable Battery Association (PRBA), who can direct consumers to the nearest collection center.

Beginning Feb. 25, Black & Decker will tell consumers the locations of 600 collection centers nationwide, including 117 of its own service centers, said marketing communications director Ellen Foreman.

As an incentive to consumers to recycle, B&D will offer a special coupon to consumers who come into the collection centers. Upon their purchase of a new B&D product, the coupon will be redeemable for a free book, *Everyday House Repairs,* valued at $15.

Gates Energy Products' new IntelliLink system, introduced six months ago, allows cordless power tools to use rechargeable AA, C and D batteries, rather than a custom-designed battery pack. In case consumers use disposable batteries, it contains a safety device to lock them out of the charging circuit.

Getting rid of mercury

The New Jersey law also makes the sale of disposable batteries that contain mercury illegal after 1995.

Duracell, Eveready, Rayovac and Panasonic have worked for years to reduce the mercury levels in batteries, and their products now comply with current regulations requiring 99.975 percent mercury-free batteries. The challenge is to find a 100 percent mercury-free battery that does not contain any other heavy metal.

Eveready is now testing a 100 percent mercury-free product in two markets, according to vp-trade development Gary Baker. The company hopes to establish whether consumers will pay more for the product and if they will accept the performance, which is inferior to batteries now on the market.

There is an equal need for manufacturers to make rechargers that extend the lives of rechargeables, thus curtailing the flow of returns.

B&D's DeWalt division is putting a new recharger called the Supercharger on the market this year. The new device can recharge any DeWalt cordless power tool battery in just 13 minutes and a battery from any other brand of power tool in 15 minutes. More importantly, it doubles the life of any battery it regularly charges.

Housing start rebound predicted at NAHB show

(Continued from page 5)
marked the organization's 50th year. The golden anniversary, together with the trade group's new battle cry of "Freedom to Build," fanned the fires of an aggressively positive attitude toward business. Suppliers, retailers and customers essentially are determined not to face another year like 1991, during which housing starts fell to the lowest level in modern history.

1.1 million starts in 1992

This year, the nation is at peace, interest rates have plummeted and construction business has shown sights of life since Christmas.

But memories of 1991 still linger. According to panelists at NAHB's economic forecast seminar, consumer confidence remains low, as does the flow of available capital from lending institutions.

Weighing all these factors, NAHB predicts that total housing starts will reach 1.1 million units in 1992, with single-family starts contributing just under a million units (*see chart, page 5*).

New products rolled out

As is the case with most trade events, this show generated lots of news. Some of the stories to emerge include:

- Smart House Limited Partners has finally completed and placed on the market a home that uses its comprehensive automated utilities system.

The partnership has secured Sears to provide customer service on Smart Houses through its nationwide network. And it has signed Plexus Inc. and Ademco to develop software interfaces for the Smart House security and HVAC systems;

- Pella/Rolscreen (now Pella Inc.) introduced a complete line of windows and doors for builders called Pro Line and an environmental education initiative in conjunction with the National Arbor Day Foundation;
- Black & Decker's DeWalt division debuted a new line of power drills, drivers, saws, sanders, accessories and service programs, providing what the company describes as an American alternative for the high-end professional power tool market; and
- PlyGem's SNE Enterprises unofficially announced its intentions to enter Arizona, California and Nevada markets by this June with Crestline and Vetter windows and doors, expanding its distribution coverage to 49 states.

Political backdrop

This show, held as it was in an election year, provided a backdrop for several public officials. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Jack Kemp delivered his department's new policy proposals, including efforts to spearhead aggressive zoning and financial regulatory reform.

Senator Paul Simon (D-Ill.) joined former President Jimmy Carter in marking NAHB and Habitat for Humanity's first Homes Across America project, an affordable house built right in the convention center parking lot.

President George Bush held an interactive video teleconference with NAHB members in the convention center's main ballroom. In the conference, Bush previewed a number of themes that emerged in his State of the Union address, including a $5,000 tax credit and Individual Retirement Account provisions for first-time home buyers.

Builders Emporium remodels four Las Vegas Ole's

(Continued from page 1)
Costa Mesa, Oxnard, Pasadena and two in Bakersfield—were all finished in 1991.

The main difference between the California remodels and those here is that some newer lines may not be rolled out in Las Vegas, said Jim McKitrick, BE's president.

The large framing and kitchen accessories departments, for example, are not nearly as extensive in the Nevada stores.

New for Ole's—and possibly a preview of what's to come at BE—is a huge paint store-within-a-store at the rear of the unit's 30- by 60-foot center drive aisle.

The Rancho Drive store is the last one the company plans to open in a large market, McKitrick said.

"We opened the store to fill out the market before committing to the smaller market strategy," he said.

Expansion disclosed

Looking ahead, McKitrick said the remodels signal some aggressive plans the company has in store this year.

BE plans to remodel 18 to 20 stores by the end of 1992, and projects doing another 30 by 1993. The company also plans to open about eight new units in 1992, most of which will be located in small markets in Nevada and Arizona, like Bullhead City and Lake Havasu. The first four of these stores should be open in the next four months, McKitrick said.

He said the chain is in the process of negotiating on three or four sites in Arizona, and two or three of the new stores will be in small California towns, he said.

If all goes well with BE's push into Arizona and Nevada, the company may decide to open a new distribution center in Nevada, McKitrick said. Right now the chain is serviced out of one DC in Pomona, Calif.

"First we'll see what kind of demand there is before we make a commitment," McKitrick said.

Yet while the chain plans its expansion, it is also continuing to evaluate current markets where stores may not be profitable. In 1991, BE closed six units in California, McKitrick said.

Correction

A Feb. 3 article on specialty lumber incorrectly reported that Riverhead Building Supply Co. had added a new siding product called Duratemp. The company does not stock that product.

Dealers put faith in free trade

(Continued from page 24)
For example, Payless Cashways is one of several chains that no longer have import directors. Products that were imported directly by Ace Hardware Corp. accounted for only 2 percent of Ace's total revenues last year, according to Murray Armstrong, import buyer for the Oak Brook, Ill.-based co-op.

Direct imports were down 40 percent in 1991 at HomeClub, the Fullerton, Calif.-based chain, which, according to its president, Jim Halpin, hasn't sent a buyer to the Orient in search of new product lines for 12 months.

HomeClub is among a growing number of retailers that encourage their customers to "Buy American." The most vocal advocate of this marketing strategy is Wal-Mart, even though the discount chain, its competitors are quick to assert, carries as much imported merchandise as any dealer.

The meaning of "American-made" gets confusing when U.S. manufacturers, in the spirit of "globalization," make or assemble products overseas and sell them here with their brand names on them.

But given consumers' nervousness about the fragile state of the U.S. economy, an appeal to their sense of national pride has proven to be good business. "It plays well with customers," said Halpin, whose stores have hung American flags next to domestically made merchandise. "I don't need research to tell me that."

HomeClub and most other home improvement dealers insist that, all things being roughly equal, they will buy from an American supplier.

However, Halpin thinks it would be "imprudent" to rely on U.S.-made fare exclusively, primarily because certain foreign-made lines, such as Makita power tools, have established consumer franchises that cannot be ignored by dealers.